

Episode 34: Climbing a volcano

Summary

As part of their recent trip to southern Italy, Nick and Wendy climbed the volcano on the island of Stromboli. In this conversation they talk about the climb and what they saw at the top of the volcano.

Transcript

Nick: In a couple of recent episodes, Wendy and I talked about our trip to Naples and that was part of a longer trip through southern Italy that's still going.

Wendy: Yep, we're still on it.

Nick: And so from Naples we took an overnight ferry to the Aeolian Islands, which is a group of seven inhabited islands and a few other smaller islands off the north coast of Sicily.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And so the first island if you're coming from Naples, which was our destination anyway, is the island of Stromboli, which is famous for having a very active volcano.

Wendy: Yeah, I mean the whole island basically is a volcano and there are a couple of very small villages that are built right on the coast at the bottom of, kind of, the foothill of the volcano, I guess you would say. And then most of the landmass is a volcano itself.

Nick: Right, and the entire island chain is full of volcanoes, really. Uhh, there's one other island which is actually called Vulcano, which is the Italian for volcano, umm, but Stromboli is the most famous one, I guess because it's the most active or the most recently active in our time.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And so we went there for one reason, which was to climb this volcano, and so we only stayed for one night, but the point was basically to go up and climb the volcano. And so we were there in March which is low season still, it's, uhh, about

mid-March, mid-to-late March as we're recording. And so there weren't very many tourists at all on Stromboli.

Wendy: No, not at all. And I think if we had gone even one week later, then it might have been quite different, uhh, because the season is just about to get started, but we were still there right at the end of the low season. And so at one point we weren't sure that we were going to be able to climb the volcano because it looked like there might not be any other people to go with and then it would be very expensive if we had to do it just with the two of us and a guide.

Nick: Right, because there are several agencies who do walking, hiking trips to the volcano. Umm, and then often in the summer, you know, each of them has a full group and they all go up to the crater¹. Umm, but yeah, in our case that wasn't true at all, and so in fact we ended up going with just two other people and the guide, so there were five of us including the guide. Umm, and you have to climb the volcano with a guide if you're going to do it now. They put in a few regulations, uhh, a couple of years ago, or a few years ago, and so you can go by yourself up to a certain level, which I believe is 400 metres above sea level. And if you want to go further than that you really need to go with a guide, umm, just for safety, which is fair enough² and, you know, we would have probably struggled a little bit without a guide, or it was probably necessary at least.

Wendy: Yeah, I thought it was a good idea, and our guide was really good. He was a really friendly guy and knew a lot about volcanology and about the island. And you could see that he was really passionate about it, and it almost looked like it was his first time up there, even though I know it's not, I know he's been up there probably hundreds of times. But he was taking pictures and making videos and, you know, he seemed just as enthralled³ with it as we were which was really nice to see.

Nick: Right, he spends his whole year on volcanoes, basically, because he told us, I think, that he was from around the region around Mount Etna in Sicily but his wife is from Stromboli, and so he spends his summers guiding people up Stromboli and then in the winter he does a lot of guiding or other work, uhh, around Etna.

Wendy: Umm-hmm, yeah.

Nick: And so volcanoes are basically his whole life. Umm, and so yeah, there was I guess a good thing and a bad thing about being there in low season. Umm, the bad thing was that we had to pay a little bit more because there wasn't a large enough

¹ crater: the cup-shaped hole at the top of a volcano

² fair enough: reasonable, understandable, fine

³ enthralled: amazed, captivated

group, so we had to pay almost double what we otherwise would have paid to go on this trip up the volcano. But the good thing was there was just our group and that was it.

Wendy: Yeah, we were the only five people up there, and the guide told us that normally in high season you would have maybe 150 people up at the top of the summit all at one time, which would have been a very different experience and, umm, a much worse experience probably.

Nick: Yeah, and so everybody goes to the same, kind of, point on the crater rim and so, yeah, you would just literally have a line of people, uhh, all looking down into the volcano. So, yeah, we were very glad in the end that we were able to go and have it virtually to ourselves.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: So it's quite interesting as you go up because volcanic soil can be very rich on the one hand but then it can also lead to very barren stretches on the other hand, so as you're walking up Stromboli, up until 500 metres, there's quite a lot of vegetation. And because it was spring there were some flowers growing and wildflowers and things like that.

Wendy: Yep, there was one flower in particular that he pointed out, and I don't remember the name - he gave us the scientific name of the flower - but it's one that is endemic⁴ to the island of Stromboli and 60 per cent of all of that type, that species of plant throughout the whole world, 60 per cent of them live right there on Stromboli. Umm, so, yeah, there was lots of vegetation and some that I hadn't seen before and, yeah, it was a really nice walk up.

Nick: It was kind of a mixture of vegetation too because there were flowers and things like that but there were also cacti⁵...

Wendy: Right.

Nick: ...which you usually associate more with Mexico or the desert and things like that. And then you get up to 500 metres and it just stops.

Wendy: Yeah.

⁴ endemic: native to a particular place (often but not always used with flora)

⁵ cacti: plural of cactus, a plant that grows in semi-desert conditions, especially in the Americas

Nick: And it's almost like this perfect line where suddenly the vegetation ends completely and then you're just left with this rock and ash⁶, a very black and dark landscape as you go up the final stretch to get up to the crater.

Wendy: Yep, and it got a bit more difficult then because it was like walking through sand, really. It was, umm, yeah, it was volcanic ash, uhh, and so, well you know what it's like to walk on a beach. It's quite difficult if the sand keeps, you know, pulling your feet down and, uhh, so it was a bit tougher climbing but we made it to the top.

Nick: Yeah, so the crater is about 950 metres above sea level and we obviously began at sea level, right at the village, uhh, on the coast that you mentioned before. And it took us about two-and-a-half hours to go up. And to be honest, apart from the sand that you mentioned, I thought it was quite easy.

Wendy: Yeah, umm, yeah, considering how high we climbed, it felt like it wasn't really very difficult.

Nick: And so in summer when there's all these people going, like you said they can be up to 150 people, I think they have someone dedicated to first aid at 500 metres, and if there are some people who aren't very fit or who are having physical problems, umm, there's a chance that they can basically bow out⁷ at that point, or they can get the help that they need and then be taken back down. Umm, so they're quite insistent that you have to be fit and that you have to have the right shoes and the right equipment and everything, umm, so I thought it was going to be really difficult, but actually I found it quite easy.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, I guess that was a pleasant surprise, because, uhh, we haven't really been doing a lot of exercise over the last few months, so we felt like we weren't really in great shape and that it might be a bit difficult for us, but it wasn't.

Nick: Yeah, especially after all that pizza in Naples.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Umm, and so you get to the top and it's really amazing because you have this, umm, crater that you're on top of and you're looking down into the volcano but you're also there at sunset - all the tours always go in the afternoon - and so you can see the sun setting over the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and then you just look down into the crater and it's really quite amazing.

⁶ ash: black powder that remains after something burns, e.g. cigarette ash or volcanic ash

⁷ bow out (phrasal verb): withdraw from something before it's over (pronunciation of bow in this case: rhymes with cow)

Wendy: Yeah, it is. And, uhh, so then when you look down, we saw a lot of smoke, there was a lot of smoke coming out, and we could see that even before we got to the top as well, or even from the village at the bottom, you can see a lot of smoke coming out. Umm...

Nick: Right, it looks like cloud but it's volcanic smoke, or, uhh, fumes that are coming out of the volcano.

Wendy: Yep. But we were ... there is, uhh, you know, kind of a pool of lava, a lake of lava underneath that smoke and we did ... we were able to catch glimpses⁸ as well.

Nick: Right, because as the sun set, and I don't know if it happens like that all the time, but the smoke began to clear and the clouds began to clear, and we began to be able to see more and more, uhh, inside the crater, and then we saw these explosions where you see the lava go up into the air, and, umm, that's always an incredible thing to see.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, it was.

Nick: And so about two years ago I think, they had a really big explosion of Stromboli and so right now the explosions aren't - the regular daily little explosions - aren't as big as they used to be. But that's for the people who go up all the time, for the guides and other people, but for us we thought the explosions were pretty cool.

Wendy: Yeah, I mean for most people it's going to be a once-in-a-lifetime thing to climb an active volcano. And, uhh, if it's not something you see on a daily basis then yeah, you would definitely be impressed with it. And I think we were already impressed even before we saw the explosions, just being up there. Just the experience of, yeah, being on top of the world and looking down and seeing that you're surrounded by the ocean, by the sea, and then you have this dark, black, crater that you're looking into. It's really an otherworldly⁹ experience.

Nick: And then of course once the sun set, it got quite dark, and so then we had to walk back in the dark but there were lots of stars overhead and it was also an interesting walk back down.

Wendy: Yeah, apparently there are no streetlights in the village, in Stromboli, because the people don't want them. Because they want to be able to enjoy

⁸ glimpses: little looks

⁹ otherworldly: from another planet

stargazing¹⁰ and seeing the stars, so, uhh, yeah, that was something we enjoyed on the way down, for sure.

¹⁰ stargazing: the hobby of looking at stars

Comprehension Questions

1. Why weren't there very many people climbing the volcano when Nick and Wendy were there?
2. What was the landscape and vegetation like on the slopes of the volcano?
3. Why were the explosions that Nick and Wendy saw not as big as they were several years earlier?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. This game is pretty boring and it could go on for hours. I don't want to keep playing so I'm going to _____ instead.
2. Lemurs are _____ to Madagascar. There are dozens of different species.
3. She hates it when her boyfriend smokes. Even more than the smoke, what she hates is the _____ that goes everywhere.
4. If you go on holiday to Los Angeles, you may get some _____ of movie stars.
5. Antarctica is an _____ place. Everywhere you look you're surrounded by snow and ice.
6. The classic image many people have of Mexico is of _____ in the desert.
7. He offered me a _____ deal but after thinking about it long and hard, I decided to turn it down.
8. There's a volcano in Indonesia where a new _____ has started to grow inside the old one. It's quite a sight!
9. We went to a magic show and my son was _____. Now he wants to become a magician when he grows up.
10. One of the benefits of living in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere is that it's great for _____ at night, because there are hardly any lights and the visibility is great.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever climbed a volcano? If so, where was it and what was the experience like? If not, would you like to?
2. If you climbed Stromboli, would you rather pay more and have fewer people on the mountain like Nick and Wendy had to do, or pay less and have more people?
3. If you went to an island for a holiday, would you prefer to go to a volcanic one where you can hike, or an island with beaches where you can relax? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. There weren't many people there because they were there in March which is the low season for tourism.
2. At the bottom of the volcano, up to about 500 metres, there is a lot of vegetation including flowers and cacti. Above that level, it's very rocky, ashy and barren.
3. Because there was a large eruption two years earlier and the daily explosions have been smaller ever since.

Exercises

1. bow out
2. endemic
3. ash
4. glimpses
5. otherworldly
6. cacti
7. fair enough
8. crater
9. enthralled
10. stargazing